Ombudsman Probes Booking and Use of Sports Facilities Managed by Leisure and Cultural Services Department

The Ombudsman, Mr Alan Lai, is initiating a direct investigation into the booking and utilisation of sports facilities managed by the Leisure and Cultural Services Department ("LCSD") in order to ensure the proper use of facilities heavily subsidised by public funds.

The Office of The Ombudsman often receives complaints or enquiries about LCSD sports facilities, mostly involving the booking and use of venues. Over the past two years, for instance, the Office has handled more than 50 such complaint cases.

Currently, for LCSD's land-based facilities, there are totally around 62,000 fee-charging (mostly on one-hour basis) and 12,000 non-fee charging sessions available each day for use by the public. These facilities are provided for a wide variety of sports activities.

"About 80% of the general costs of LCSD sports facilities, programmes and related activities are subsidised by public funds. Users come from different age groups and all walks of life in the territory. It is, therefore, of utmost importance to ensure that members of the public have a fair chance to use those facilities and that abuse and wastages are stopped as far as possible," Mr Lai said today (5 July 2011).

"The complaints we received and media reports in recent years also showed that touting of reserved sessions in sports facilities has aroused much public concern. Online touting is particularly rampant. The Administration’s measures to crack down on such unauthorised activities appear to be less than effective," Mr Lai continued.

To foster sports development in Hong Kong, LCSD's current policy allows block-booking of sports venues by certain organisations (such as national sports associations, district or community sports clubs, schools, Government departments, charitable organisations, *bona fide* associations and corporations, etc) for sports competitions, events and training courses. Priority booking can be made three to 12 months in advance, depending on the nature of the applicant organisation and the event to be held. Individuals can only make advance booking of sessions not taken up by block-booking within 30 days.

To balance the rights and needs between organisations and individuals regarding the use of sports venues, the Administration has set restrictions on block-booking and put in place a penalty system to prevent abuse of priority booking by organisations. At present, block-booking is subject to quota control which mainly covers: (1) during peak hours (for urban venues, it means the whole day of Saturdays, Sundays and public holidays, as well as 5 pm to 11 pm on weekdays), not more than one-third of the total available hours of the month; and (2) not more than half of the total number of facilities at each venue at any one time.

Our preliminary inquiries have identified room for improvement in the LCSD booking and allocation mechanism of sports facilities. Take the fee-charging and non-fee charging land-based sports facilities as an illustration. In the year 2009/10, LCSD recorded more than 700 cases of breach of the conditions of use by priority user organisations which, having confirmed the booking of a venue, subsequently did not turn up and failed to cancel the booking at least 40 days prior to the date of use as required. Each time, however, LCSD just issued a verbal or written advice/warning, even to repeated offenders. Without any substantial penalty, the deterrent effect is questionable.

'If the Administration is to successfully promote 'Sports for All', it is essential that there should be a better mechanism for booking and using sports facilities by the general public. We hope the direct investigation can help achieve this objective," Mr Lai added.

The direct investigation will examine:

(a) the booking and allocation mechanism of LCSD sports facilities;

(b) measures to prevent abuse and wastage of reserved facilities;

(c) measures against touting or unauthorised transfer of reserved sessions; and

(d) any areas for improvement.

The Ombudsman welcomes public views on this matter. Comments and views should reach the Office of The Ombudsman by **6 August 2011**:

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Office of The Ombudsman
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